DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 903 RC 019 132

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TITLE Effective School Climate: Roles for Peers, Practitioners, and Principals.
INSTITUTION Western Illinois Univ., Macomb. Illinois Inst. for Rural Affairs.
SPONS AGENCY Illinois State Office of the Lieutenant Governor, Springfield.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Information Analyses (070)
JOURNAL CIT Rural Research Report; v3 n4 Spr 1992

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conflict Resolution; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Interpersonal Competence; *Peer Counseling; Positive Reinforcement; Problem Solving; Program Descriptions; Role of Education; Rural Areas; Rural Education; *School Effectiveness; *Student Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Illinois; Mediation

ABSTRACT

Current research on school effectiveness concludes that differences among schools affect students' academic achievement. An important characteristic of effective schools is providing a safe and secure environment. An example of programs that address this issue are peer mediation or conflict resolution programs. These programs require the combined efforts and training of administration, teachers, students, and parents in providing a safe and secure learning environment. Research demonstrates that these programs positively affect mediators' attitudes toward conflicts and have a positive impact on student mediators' self-image, problem-solving skills, sensitivity to others, and leadership skills. In addition, these programs have a positive influence on the general school climate, the number of fights and violent incidents, teachers' attitudes toward conflict, and the amount of instructional time in the classroom. Five elements usually found in school mediation programs are: (1) say what happened and how you feel without blaming; (2) listen to the other person; (3) say what you want from the other person; (4) think together about possible solutions; and (5) mutually agree to a solution. Two case studies describe the positive results of school mediation programs and illustrate the use of rewards to promote good student behavior. (LP)

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Rural Research Report
Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

Vol. 3, Issue 4
Spring 1992

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RC019132

Rural
RESEARCH REPORT

Spring 1992
Vol. 3, Issue 4

Published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs

Western Illinois University
518 Stipes Hall
Macomb, IL 61455
(309) 298-2237

Effective School Climate: Roles for Peers, Practitioners, and Principals

by Michael G. Jacobson and Robert H. Lombard[1]

A recent study by the National Rural Development Institute (Helge, 1990) shows that stress on rural students is at least as great as the stress experienced by inner-city youth. In fact, rural children fared worse than non-rural students in statistical comparisons of substance abuse, involvement with crime, depression, and low self-esteem. These findings are particularly meaningful because so many of our nation's schools are rural. Two-thirds of the nation's school districts that educate one-third of our children are found in rural communities.

Helge recommends that educators and public policy makers recognize both the link, "...between high self-esteem and positive academic grades, school attendance and social skills," and the link "between poor self-esteem and at-risk conditions." In addition to recognizing how these factors impact rural schools, the study goes on to state that, "parents, teachers, other service providers, and community members need to learn skills that enable students in pain to identify and express their feelings, validate themselves, and gain a sense of self-worth and personal power" (p. 4). As rural schools search for programs that offer ways to enhance self-esteem and empower students, the research on effective schools provides insight into several areas that may help educators of rural youth.

Effective Schools

In contrast with previous research (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972) which suggested that differences in school achievement could be attributed to family background, luck and personality, educational research on school effectiveness conducted in the 1980s concluded that differences among schools do affect students' academic achievement. Variables examined in the more recent studies included: 1) how schools and school districts are structured and how decisions are made; 2) the process of change in schools and school districts; and, 3) how classrooms and schools can increase time spent on productive instruction (Purkey and Smith, 1982; Levine, 1991). The methodology employed to identify the correlates/predictors of higher academic achievement calls for the creation of a dichotomy of unusually high and low achieving schools and the application of surveys and case studies to explain variability in student performance.

When the effects of socioeconomic status and race are controlled, researchers have found other important variables that clearly distinguish between effective and ineffective schools. Among these are effective leadership (the principal), clear expectations for students and teachers, and a safe, secure environment. An effective school is often described as one "characterized by high evaluations of students, high expectations, high norms of achievement, with the appropriate patterns of reinforcement and instruction," in which students "acquire a sense of control over their environment and overcome the feelings of futility which...characterize students in many schools" (Brookover et al., 1979, p. 243). Similarly, the National Institute of Education's *Safe School Study* (US Department of HEW, 1978) identified those factors that make schools safe, nonviolent, orderly institutions of learning. School governance was found to be of critical importance in creating safe schools, and the *Safe School Study* concluded that the central role in school governance is played by the principal. Those principals who serve as firm disciplinarians, strong behavioral role models and educational leaders are crucial in creating safe schools.

This is where old meets new, and a key set of questions is raised. Can safety and security be achieved simply through the implementation of a strictly enforced code of behavior?

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Are they solely the responsibility of the adults in a school? With the emergence of *peer mediation* the definition of a "safe and secure" environment takes on new meaning, and the answers to these questions change. Herein, a safe and secure environment results from the combined efforts and training of administration, teachers, students, and parents.

This synthesis of "old" and "new" takes place against a background in which critics of America's education have often taken schools to task for jumping on too many bandwagons and looking for panaceas in every medicine bottle to solve our educational ills (Slavin, 1989). Unfortunately, many of these criticisms are true. We seem far too willing to be redirected to the latest medicine show before we develop a proficiency for that which is currently in use. William Ziekle, principal of Northview Elementary School in Bolingbrook, Illinois, suggests that it is particularly refreshing to discover something "new"-mediation which complements something "old"-effective schools (Ziekle, 1989). The same can also be said for the "new" consistent reinforcement of desired behaviors complementing the "old" firm enforcement of expectations and discipline. Each of these syntheses is explored in this report.

Student Mediated Conflict Resolution

The last decade has seen increased interest in the teaching of conflict resolution skills in school settings. There has been a proliferation of programs and accompanying curricular activities which reflect the belief that the study of conflict and its resolution should begin at an early age. Schools are involved in a range of activities which include the development of peer mediation programs, conflict resolution curriculum development, and staff training in conflict resolution skills (See Cheatham, 1989, for an overview of school-based mediation and conflict resolution materials for students, elementary to university levels).

The formation of the National Association for Mediation in Education (NAME) in 1984 offers testimony to the rapid development of school-based conflict resolution programs. NAME is an organization of school officials, teachers, community mediation project staff, university and law school professors, law-related education specialists, and educational organization staff who are interested in working with conflict resolution programs in schools and universities. The number of schools teaching conflict resolution or mediation has increased from a mere handful five years ago to more than 200 today. The rolls of NAME members have increased correspondingly. These increases clearly attest to the current level of excitement in this field (Cheatham, 1988, presents a comprehensive overview of over 200 school mediation and conflict resolution programs across the United States).

Reasons for Implementing Conflict Resolution. A review of active mediation program descriptions (Davis and Porter, 1985) reveals that the most common motivating reasons for those who wish to promote mediation in the schools are:

1. Conflict is a natural human state often accompanying changes in our institutions or personal growth. It is better approached with skills than avoidance.
2. More appropriate and effective systems than expulsion, suspension, court intervention and detention are required to handle conflict in the school setting.
3. The use of mediation to resolve school-based disputes can result in improved communication between and among students, teachers, administrators and parents, and can, in general, improve the school climate. Mediation can also provide a forum for addressing common concerns.
4. Mediators used for conflict resolution can reduce violence, vandalism, chronic school absence and suspensions.
5. Mediation training helps both young people and their teachers deepen their understanding of themselves and others, and provides them with lifetime dispute resolution skills.
6. Mediation training increases student interest in conflict resolution, justice, and the American legal system and encourages a higher level of citizenship activity.
7. Shifting the responsibility for solving appropriate school conflicts from adults to young adults and children allows teachers and administrators to concentrate more on teaching and less on discipline.
8. Allowing young people to resolve their own disputes encourages their growth and enhances basic learning skills such as listening, critical thinking and problem-solving.
9. Mediation training, with its emphasis on listening to others' points of view and peaceful resolution of differences, assists students in preparing to live in a multicultural world.
10. Mediation provides a method of problem-solving that is uniquely suited to the personal nature of young peoples' problems, and can frequently be used by students to solve problems they would not take to parents, teachers or principals.

Interest in these programs has been stimulated primarily by word-of-mouth accounts of their positive effects. Anecdotal reports from administrators and participants in pioneer programs such as Project SMART in New York City and the Conflict Managers Program in San Francisco have made these programs models for many others. However, little research is available on either the magnitude of the impact or the direction of school mediation programs. It is generally believed in the field that mediation training makes the mediators feel better about themselves and contributes to a better school climate. The basis for these beliefs and how mediation training accomplishes these ends, however, are not clearly known. It is believed, but not well-documented, that school mediation programs improve school climate and help resolve disputes between students. Lam (1989), in a synthesis of the research drawn from evaluations of 14 programs across the United States and Canada, concludes that such programs positively affect mediators' attitudes toward conflicts and have a positive impact on student mediators' self-image, problem-solving skills, sensitivity to others, and leadership experience. Lam also concludes that the programs impact positively on the general school climate, the number of fights and violent incidents, teachers' attitudes toward conflict, and the amount of instructional time in the classroom.

Training and Implementation for Conflict Resolution

The *Directory of School Mediation and Conflict Resolution Programs* (Cheatham, 1988) offers a nationwide view of mediation and conflict resolution programs. Directors of peer mediation programs may use similar curricula and training methods. Four distinct models appear prevalent and programs reflect the uniqueness of needs of particular students, communities and schools. For example, some schools find it satisfactory to train only a few students as mediators while others decide to train all students in conflict resolution.

Schools using mediation have simplified the process for children. The *Directory* (Cheatham, 1988), suggests that five elements are usually included in school programs:

1. say what happened and how you feel without blaming;
2. listen to the other person;
3. say what you want from the other person;
4. think together about possible solutions; and
5. mutually agree to a solution.

In most school programs a small number of students are selected by peers and/or teachers to become student mediators. Coordinators try for a racial, ethnic, and gender balance and often students "at-risk" of dropping out of schools are encouraged to become mediators. Students are usually trained for 12 to 20 hours. After training mediators work in pairs or individually, during class time or before and after school, to help fellow students resolve disputes non-violently.

Generally, elementary students mediate playground and classroom disputes which involve pushing, name-calling and unfair play. Middle and high school mediators work with these and more sophisticated issues such as arguments about ownership of property or rumors. In some high school programs student/teacher teams mediate disputes between other students and faculty. In many schools student mediators wear special pins, hats, or T-shirts. The case study of Hillcrest Elementary School illustrates in the nurturing language of the faculty how they have turned to conflict resolution.

Implications

While the settings of the two projects profiled on the following two pages differ (i.e., East Moline and Kewanee), each represents a relatively inexpensive way to make a positive impact on school climate. Hillcrest's conflict resolution program and Wethersfield's "caught being good" approach are clearly transferable to nearly all school settings. There is room to modify each program so that it more closely fits both the personalities of educators implementing them and the community setting of the school. In addition, we should note that both cases highlight situations in which the collaborative leadership of teachers and administrators has made a distinct difference in the lives of children as the "new" and "old" complement each other. As is usually the case, programs implemented by a collaborative team of educators can achieve a common goal that clearly goes beyond a "large dose of the newest medicine." The goal in these cases was to synthesize approaches that could achieve or maintain a nurturing school climate for children. At this point in time, both appear to be succeeding.

Case Study: Hillcrest Elementary, East Moline, IL

As with many teachers working in Illinois schools, several members of the staff at Hillcrest Elementary School in East Moline, were concerned about the way children at the school treated each other. The tedious rounds of name-calling, playground clashes, and general rudeness evident during recess and other off-time periods led staff members to conclude that, "The children's treatment of each other was unacceptable." Hillcrest's current enrollment is 350, and the student body reflects the diversity of the community. Minority groups make up approximately one-third of the student population.

Setting and Rationale. A music teacher with duties in several buildings approached a special educator and the principal about instituting a student-based Conflict Mediation Program at Hillcrest. The teacher had both training and previous experience as a mediator in adult settings, and thought the process might prove useful in reducing student incidents (e.g., name-calling, fights) and referrals to the office for disciplinary problems. Planning for a Conflict Mediation Program began during the 1990-1991 academic year while the building was being changed from a K-5 building to a K-4 building. Although the shift of fifth grade students elsewhere necessitated the use of younger students as mediators, the steering committee continued to plan for the implementation of the program. Funding was secured through a local assistance grant and from civic groups. Total cost for the training to implement the program was approximately $1,300.

Program and Implementation. Implementation was accomplished in the following stages:

1. Two teachers were sent to the Lombard Mennonite Peace Institute and four teachers attended an Iowa Peace Institute Workshop.
2. Staff development funds were used to provide substitute teachers so that the 14 teachers on the staff could become versed in the conflict mediation process.
3. Each student in the school was taught about the importance of communicating with other students. Communication skills were taught during social studies and health time. Skills included were: listening, paraphrasing and restating, identification of feelings behind the words, point of view, using "I" messages, conflict and conflict resolution, identifying the problem, problem-solving, and making "good" resolutions.
4. Student mediators were chosen from among the third and fourth graders. Students were nominated because of their demonstrated leadership among their peers; students exhibiting both positive and negative leadership were included among the nominees. Forty students, mostly third graders, were provided the equivalent of two days training in peer mediation techniques in addition to the communication skills classes described above.

Results. The principal noted a 44 percent reduction in the number of disciplinary referrals made by teachers. There was also an increased recognition by teachers that students can mediate many conflicts. In fact, teachers now remind students that they have the communication skills to solve many conflicts without using a student mediator. Consequently, staff has noted an increasing tendency for students to resolve conflicts themselves to avoid the time-consuming process involved with peer mediation sessions.

Caught Doing Good - Involving Teachers

Many educators have turned to the "assertive discipline" approach advocated by Canter and Canter (1976) as a means to consistently reinforce student classroom behavior and improve the climate in schools. While "assertive discipline" and other packaged models are not without critics (e.g., Gartell, 1987; Hitz, 1988; Curwin and Mendler, 1988), teachers and administrators continue to view the practice as contributing to effective teaching. In this sense the consistent approach to discipline provided by the Canter and Canter model is perceived as a method that allows teachers to spend less time on behavior problems and more time teaching. An essential component of the Canters approach is that teachers recognize and reward good behavior. Utilizing the power of reinforcement (Weber, 1958; Madsen and Madsen, 1981) on a school-wide basis also provides an intriguing way to improve the climate in a school. However, that necessitates a consistent set of expectations and a consistent set of rewards to reinforce student behavior.

The next case study illustrates how an elementary principal applied consistent reinforcement in a manner which both assisted teachers and allowed greater opportunities for the principal to engage in positive interactions with students. The language of the following case study, as in the Hillcrest Elementary case, has been kept informal as a means to illuminate the actual concerns and practices of the participants.

Case Study: Wethersfield Elementary School, Kewanee, IL

Many educators have found Assertive Discipline techniques advocated by Canter and Canter useful as they handle the daily management of classrooms and schools. Wethersfield Elementary School provides an additional level of reinforcement for those students "caught doing good." The principal implemented a program which provides immediate, tangible rewards for students (who teachers observe) performing in ways consistent with the behaviors advocated by the school or the classroom teacher.

Setting and Rationale. While teachers at Wethersfield Elementary School in Kewanee attest to the generally positive school climate present in 1990, the principal sought a way to both help teachers and permit him to interact with students in a positive way. After considerable thought he identified a program which he labeled "Caught Doing Good." Using a combination of funding from a school climate grant and contributions from local businesses, he established a system to reward good student behavior. The program also provides teachers with a flexible way to reinforce specific behaviors in their classrooms which exceed those established for the building (e.g., fifth grade teachers can reward academic performance). It is interesting to note that the principal and the teachers agree it is difficult to "catch" students truly being good as opposed to those times when students try to manipulate teachers into catching them.

Program and Implementation. Any one of the 402 students at the school can be "caught" behaving in an acceptable way (e.g., turning in found money from the playground, completing all weekly assignments). Once a student is "caught," he or she is given a "smile face" sticker and a ticket which is taken to the office as an entry in the school's weekly drawing. At the end of each week, three winners are drawn from those who were "caught" being good during the week. Each of the three weekly winners receives a prize from the principal after the Friday afternoon drawing. Students earning five "smile faces" may redeem them for items in the school "store" located in the principal's office. This not only establishes a positive association with visiting the principal, but it also permits him to visit with a large number of students.

The initial cost to open the school "store" and stock it with items promoting the school and the "Caught Being Good" program (e.g., bumper stickers, pennants, pencils) was approximately $1,200. Students visiting the school "store" are also given coupons redeemable for food items at restaurants near the school. These promotional coupons are contributed to the program by the restaurants. Photographs of those students visiting the school "store" are printed in the local newspaper, and the principal's handwritten postcards to parents further school-community relations.

Although the principal is satisfied with the large number of students he now sees in a positive situation, he has not yet processed actual data about the program. He senses that referrals for disciplinary reasons will be lower by the end of the year. Teachers are also satisfied with the program.

To Find Out More about These Programs, Contact:

Sheila Wildermuth, Principal
Hillcrest Elementary School
451 22nd Avenue
East Moline, IL 61244
Phone: (309) 755-7621

Gene Hulick, Principal
Wethersfield Elementary School
439 Willard Street
Kewanee, IL 61433
Phone: (309) 853-4800

Other Schools with Related Programs:

Peer Assistance Program
Linda Owens, Social Worker
Galva School District
Morgan Road
Galva, IL 61434
Phone: (309) 932-2108

Social Skills Program
Chris Tippit, Teacher
Findlay Elementary School
206 North Main
Findlay, IL 62534
Phone: (217) 756-8544

Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution Materials are available on a free-loan basis from the Illinois Institute for Public Understanding About the Law (IIPUAL); Department of Elementary Education and Reading; Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois 61455 or Phone: (309) 298-1784. A catalog is available upon request.

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The Rural Research Report is a series published by the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs to provide brief updates on research projects conducted by the Institute. Rural Research Reports are peer-reviewed and distributed to public officials, libraries, and professional associations involved with specific policy issues.

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